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TOWNS AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE HADHRAMAUT

By MRS. M. DE STURLER-RAEMAEKERS

Report of a lecture illustrated by a film delivered to the Society on Thursday, May 21, 1953, Mr. W. H. Ingrams, C.M.G., O.B.E., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: As you can well imagine, it is a great pleasure to me to take the chair this afternoon for Mrs. Sturler-Raemaekers, because I have spent ten years in the country which she is about to describe. Unfortunately, ever since I left it in 1944 time has done nothing but take me somewhere else in the world. I have just returned from a tour of the United States, Mexico, Central America and the West Indies. Most of my time seems to be taken up in Africa and it is difficult to get an opportunity of looking again at the Hadhramaut. Hence it is a great pleasure to be able to see Mrs. Sturler-Raemaekers' slides and to hear her account this afternoon.

I expect that in some respects at least the architecture of the Hadhramaut is familiar to many of you through Freya Stark's books, perhaps particularly the illustrations in her book *Seen in the Hadhramaut*; also Mr. Osbert Lankaster, an architect who many may know better as a cartoonist, wrote an article on the architecture of the Hadhramaut some years ago which appeared, I believe, in the *Architectural Journal*.

There is a very long tradition of architecture in the Hadhramaut. One wonders how long this wonderful working in mud has gone on. In ancient days the ancient Hadhraumauti used to go in for monumental stone masonry on a large scale. I remember seeing huge stones lying on the old Hadhramauti ruins and being told by the local people that the stones had been transported to the early buildings by the Adites, who were formerly giants. Hadhraumaut is a country which has always recognized the Book of Genesis, that there were giants in the land in those days.

Mrs. Sturler-Raemaekers was born in Holland and came to England as a child, first, during the first World War. Here she was educated, so we can at least claim part of her. Then she went to France and later came back to England to study architecture for three years at the Architectural Association. She took her degree in Brussels and practised there. Then she travelled a good deal in Europe. She returned to England again at the outbreak of the recent World War and has been here ever since except for her travelling. In 1948 Mrs. Sturler-Raemaekers thought she would go further afield and, fortunately for us and for Arabia, she chose to go there, but before doing so she took the precaution of studying Arabic for two years at London University.

Mrs. Sturler-Raemaekers spent ten months in the Hadhramaut in 1950-51 and was there again in 1952 for five months. She has told me, very modestly, that that is a very inadequate time in which to study the Hadhramaut, but I think we shall discover that she found out a great deal of much interest while she was there.

MY experience of the Middle East is, as you have heard, somewhat brief, being only three years. I therefore feel a little embarrassed when speaking before a gathering in which there may be many who have probably travelled there for much longer periods. I trust they will show some indulgence towards anything I may say which may not be either new or just as they saw it; I have at least specialized knowledge in one subject which took me there, and that is architecture. I went to study the buildings of Hadhramaut and make measured drawings of them. I do not intend to give a technical discourse on exactly how the buildings are constructed or how the bricks are made, because I do not think that this is

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Some miles out of Aden a sultan recently killed two of his cousins because of some rivalry between them, and not more than fifteen years ago there were cases of open piracy at Balhaf. Such incidents will illustrate that it is not easy country to travel through or to subjugate, isolated as it is behind roadless mountains and plateaux. There are some 500 miles of this barren, rough country, where the people are fiercely independent and distrustful of outsiders. It was long impossible to travel right across it, and it has been done by only very few people, chiefly by the Dutch explorer Van der Meulen, who has crossed it three times.

Considering the geography it is not surprising that modern civilization, and particularly European civilization, has never penetrated the interior of this peninsula. In such outcrops of continents as this all civilization seems to come and go very slowly, and so does life itself. The Indo-European civilization, which started in the Fertile Crescent before the time of Ur of the Chaldeans, has only very slowly percolated down to this outcrop of Asia, as it did in the peninsulas of India and Malaya; once there, it remained static and almost intact for 4,000 years. When one goes to Hadhramaut now one can almost imagine living in the time of Abraham of Ur and the Chaldeans.

The Hadhramis themselves trace back their ancestry and history to Noah, from whom they descend through Sem and his grandson Ad, who is their legendary father of the giant race, and from whom in turn descends *Hathermaveth*, whose name means "Death is Present" and became "Hadhramaut." This shows that in those far-off days the Arabs of Southern Arabia were hardly less bellicose than they were until the British came to Hadhramaut in 1934, when Mr. Ingrams started negotiating cessation of wars and blood feuds.

Hadhramaut, we know then, lies 400 miles from Aden eastwards along a roadless coast, across merciless basalt mountains, quicksand, dunes and deserted beaches—400 miles of sand and rock and ragged cliffs, with only five unknown bedouin fishing hamlets en route. Going along this coast—be it by plane, dhow or, at last, since 1951 by pioneer desert trucks—one can hardly believe that any form of life is possible inside or behind these torrid treeless wastes. For behind these coastal ranges, to the north, we know it is the great desert that covers all Southern Arabia, the Empty Quarter, which has but four or five oases along the 600- or 700-mile camel route that crosses it. Neither from north nor south is there seemingly any life vein, nor from east nor west. Yet it is here that we shall find the valley of Hadhramaut.

Like the hidden valley of Petra, Hadhramaut has remained secluded throughout the centuries, but with this difference: the valley of Hadhramaut is not dead.

When one has braved the 400 miles of desolation eastward from Aden, one suddenly comes upon a great scintillating white harbour; a crescent moon wedged between an azure bay and blistering pink rocks. This is Mukalla, the beautiful white-and-blue port, the cup of its harbour filled with many little native craft and sailing dhows. Behind the town there seems nothing but endless waste tableland with one or two poor bedouin hamlets—the Jol, rising to 6,000 feet and stretching 150 miles inland. But

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that is to say, small piles of stones on which a fire is made till they are hot and on which meat can be roasted.

The number of people in this village who seemed to be afflicted with blindness or with other diseases of the eye was startling. The cemetery, which lies outside the village, is large; rows of graves covered with little hillocks of stones give the impression of not yet being old. Dahma has, apparently, been decimated by an epidemic. The neatly cultivated fields lie awaiting the rain. Two date-palms as well as some *nibq* trees increase the parched and barren impression of the place.

Apparently we are over the watershed here and in the river-basin of Ḥaḍramaut Proper. The landscape looks dryer and emptier of vegetation. The *euphorbia* bushes have neither fruit nor blossom, and the few grasses are dried up. After passing Dahma we saw an artificial pond, at present dry, made at the cost of much labour, which is intended to hold the water after rain.

Half an hour after sunset we reached Bureyyira, our quarters for the night, situated close by a small village.

7. AN EXCURSION TO THE RUINS OF THE PEOPLE OF ʿĀD.

There were great things on the programme for May 14th. We had often questioned our Bedouins about ruins and inscriptions, and they understood what we meant, for all of them knew about the remains of the towns and graves of the people of ʿĀd and Thamûd, the original inhabitants of the land, whom Allah had swept from the face of the earth, in punishment for their many sins. The groups of ruins are actually situated more towards Ḥaḍramaut Proper, with their centre in the direction of the Yemen. Probably we were setting foot here on the borderland of Sabaean civilisation. Old Aḥmad, one of our Sēbānī Bedouins, attracted by the promised reward, said that he had pondered well over it and remembered that there were inscriptions, painted by the people of ʿĀd, on a wall of rock in Wādī Thiqbe, not far to the north-east of our route, and that, besides